

WITH THOBURN AT HONEY CREEK

By Elmer L. Fraker

"Joseph B. Thoburn lies in an unmarked grave in an Oklahoma City cemetery." This was the startling statement that was made at a recent meeting of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The mere mention of Thoburn's name sent my memory racing back over the years to the time when he led a group of five young University of Oklahoma students on an anthropological expedition to Honey Creek, in Delaware County.

It might be that a short-remembered public had forgotten this good man, who had worked so hard and sacrificed so much to the end that an accurate history of early Oklahoma might be written,—but never would the five who accompanied him to Honey Creek forget. And thereby comes this story.

As to how the expedition ever became possible has never been clearly ascertained. Some way or another, Thoburn discovered that the state Geological Survey was in possession of certain surplus funds. How he secured these extra dollars for the trip to Honey Creek remains a mystery. That he did that very thing proved his persuasive powers.

The five of us who made up his party were rather nondescript, insofar as qualifications in the field of anthropology were concerned. Joseph Mathews was a part-Osage who was later to distinguish himself as a student at Oxford and as the author of a number of books of high literary caliber. James Brill was to carve a niche for himself as an illustrator and writer with scientific publications. In Waurika, resides Andy Anderson who has become one of the leading attorneys of that section. Whatever became of Tata Tatun, no one seems to know.

Our point of departure was Oklahoma City, and the time of our leaving was in early June of 1916. The Professor, as we called Thoburn, preceded the rest of the party by three or four days. Our destination was the town of Grove, located only a few miles from Honey Creek. In following the trail of the Professor, the five of us went by train to Afton. At this place, we transferred our luggage to a wagon and were transported overland to Grove behind a span of bays.

Upon our arrival in Grove, we were met by the Professor, who was walking with a pronounced limp. When we queried him as to the cause of his halting walk, we were informed that while he was out making a survey of the best place for us to pitch our

camp, he had used a team and buggy. For some reason the team had run away and he had been unceremoniously tossed into the rocks and underbrush when the buggy overturned.

We were forced to remain in town for several days while awaiting the arrival of our heavy luggage, including picks, shovels, sieves, and tent. The reason for the delay in the arrival of our equipment came from the fact that the freight car carrying it had to be moved from Oklahoma City, up into Missouri, down into Arkansas, and back into Oklahoma at Grove.

At last our equipment arrived, and we made preparations to quit town and journey to Big Mouth Cavern on Honey Creek. To get to Big Mouth Cavern it was necessary to traverse about four miles of eastern Oklahoma hills. One of the local citizens, with a team and wagon, was hired to transport our baggage to the big cave.

It was a beautiful morning when we set out for Honey Creek, and our spirits were high. But these spirits were dampened ere we had traveled far. While struggling up the side of a hill, that would pass for a mountain in many regions, a deluge of rain swept down upon us. And there, in the midst of our discomfort, the lead mare, remembering that her beloved offspring had been left at home, became possessed with an overwhelming desire to be in the presence of her foal, and evidenced this desire by refusing to proceed further. In this situation we completely lost all respect for the maternal instinct, that is, in a horse. After all entreaties and persuasion had failed to budge the balky mare, we unhitched the team from the wagon and fled for shelter.

Strange to say, the nearest available shelter proved to be a small natural cave. No sooner had we gotten in out of the storm than Thoburn observed that there was no need of wasting time, merely because some difficulties had been encountered. He soon had us digging vigorously for evidences of the character of our shelter's first inhabitants. Within an hour we had unearthed several bits of pottery and a few arrow-heads.

The rain did not last long, and we again hitched the team to the wagon, endeavoring to entice the old nag to tighten her traces. Our persuasive efforts were in vain and it looked as though we would be indefinitely stranded on the side of a muddy hill. Our dilemma was short-lived, for a fellow traveler came along with a span of mules and kindly consented to pull our load to the top of the hill. From there the road was fairly good and at about two o'clock in the afternoon we arrived at Big Mouth Cavern.

We were a miserable lot, soaked to the skin by rain and worn to a frazzle from helping push the wagon along the muddy trail.

Within a short time, however, Jim and the Professor prepared a warm meal on a hastily improvised stove, made of two rocks that had been picked up nearby. Thus revived, we unloaded the wagon, pitched our tent, and began organizing our crew for the work that lay ahead.

Big Mouth Cavern was a natural cave opening out of the side of an almost perpendicular limestone cliff. Some seventy feet below the top of the cliff churned the clear water of Honey Creek. It is not strange that the primeval men of this region selected the big cave for a dwelling place. A few armed men could hold off a large army as long as their food supply held out. A siege would be necessary to accomplish its fall. A magnificent forest stretched from the foot of the cliff, across a wide valley, over rolling hills, and extended further on to the more easterly Ozarks.

Our tent had been pitched on what might be termed the roof of the cavern. The mouth of the cave opened near the top of the cliff and looked out towards the east. The opening of the cavern was more than twenty feet wide, but soon narrowed to a throat scarcely large enough for a man to crawl through. This narrow throat extended some fifteen or twenty feet, and then widened into a rather large chamber. In this remote chamber was to be found a type of clay which the early inhabitants used in making their best pipes and pottery.

Before we set to work, Thoburn explained to us that the earliest dwellers in Big Mouth Cavern had departed this life a few thousand years previously. He went into detail giving instructions as to how we were to identify objects of archaeological value when we found them. He pointed out that our first big job would be to remove many tons of rock that had fallen from the ceiling of the cavern which, along with a wet weather spring's addition of soil deposits, had completely covered the evidences of the life of the early cave men.

Within a short time we were busily engaged in the task that lay before us. Large sifters were set up into which we shoveled the loose dirt of the cavern floor. The dirt would go through the sifter, but anything of size was retained. For several days we were kept busy shoveling the soil into the sifters. The first foot of earth was rich in the yield of Indian relics, including stone hatchets and coarse pottery. The next eighteen inches of dirt held numerous articles of the mound-builders' day, such as grinders, arrows, and other stone implements. Below this came the interesting remains of the earth-house people's tenure, containing highly decorated pottery, beautiful arrow-heads, bone calendars, needles of bone, skin scrapers, stone awls, and peculiar

double grinders. Thoburn had already established himself as a recognized authority on the Earth-house People.

At the very bottom, in a thin strata of clay, lay the archaeological evidences of Oklahoma's earliest inhabitants. Delicately made pottery composed of clay and ground clam shell was to be seen everywhere. Small deposits of charcoal and beds of ashes were numerous, and in their midst clam shells were always found. The most interesting implements of all were the cave man's small arrow-heads, scarcely larger than a bean and perfectly made. The Professor explained that these arrows were used by poisoning the tips and shooting them from blow-pipes.

On an expedition such as this, some nonsense naturally creeps into the picture as a means of breaking the monotony of hard labor and serious study. Our expedition was no exception, and proof of this was the manner in which we double-crossed Jim, who represented one of the large daily papers in Oklahoma, and was continuously supplying that periodical with news of the progress of our undertaking.

While the rest of us were delving in the dirt and clay, and consequently into the early history of cavedom, Jim could be seen perched serenely on a nearby boulder, typewriter before him, jabbing away at the keys, writing of our discoveries. Jim's imagination occasionally got the better of him and led to newspaper accounts of our activities being considerably glamorized.

In one of Jim's descriptions, he pictured that we were living in great luxury. He did this by stating that Honey Creek was full of fish, which was true; that the forest was full of rabbit, squirrel, and quail, which was a fact; that our camp was surrounded by a thicket of blackberry bushes bending low with ripe fruit, a correct statement; that we had blackberries for dessert every day, an errorless observation; that the cream used over our berries was obtained from a goat we had rented from a farmer who lived up the creek,—a mere figment of Jim's imagination. After reading this utopian description of our living conditions, Thoburn winked slyly at the rest of us. This meant he had an idea of doing something that would bring joy to our hearts.

When Jim went to the spring to get a bucket of water, Thoburn wrapped up a can of our condensed milk and attached the following note: "This is Jim's goat." Then he addressed the package to the editor of the great daily and dropped it into the mail bag. It was reported that after receiving this bit of counter-evidence, the editor changed his mind as to the advisability of buying a dairy farm in the Honey Creek Valley.

While we worked and delved, our fame spread far and wide --as far as the Grand River on the west and the Arkansas line on the east. This fame, however, was not due to our reputation as anthropologists, but rather was based on the belief that we were gold diggers. An old Ozark legend had it that the Spanish buried gold in this locality during the exploration period. Is there any locality in Western America that doesn't have such a tradition? Most of the natives of the Honey Creek region believed we were faking about being interested in the early inhabitants of the cave. To them we were just another group hunting for buried treasure.

One day, while we were busily engaged in excavating the cavern floor, three men appeared at the cave's mouth. After watching us work for some time, one man shifted his rifle from the hollow of one arm to the hollow of the other and said, "Well, I don't know whether to let you fellers dig in there or not. You see, I've got this land leased and can keep you from digging if I want to."

"But we have permission to work here from the man who owns the land," protested the Professor.

"That don't make no difference. When a man leases land, he is the boss of it as long as the lease," replied the lanky native.

"I don't see what harm we are doing anyway," argued the Professor.

The farmer scratched his head, meditated a while, and then drawled, "Well, if you fellers'll give me half of the gold you dig up, I'll let you keep on."

At first the members of our crew were scared of the man with the gun, but when he agreed to let us continue digging if we would give him half of the gold we dug up, spasms of mirth seized us and we sought refuge behind large boulders in the cavern, so that our mirth could not be witnessed by the serious men standing on the parapet. It was a diplomatic victory for Thoburn, for the native, after shaking his head a few times and muttering to his companions, led his party of protest down the creek.

The tulip craze in Holland seemed to have been no more intense than the gold craze in Honey Creek. One Sunday, while all of our party except one, who had remained at camp as guard, were at church, twenty-three visitors found their way to our diggings. Instead of the visitors asking questions concerning the scientific side of our work, they wanted to see the Indian teeth we had dug up. The report had been circulated that we were uncovering many Indian skulls loaded down with gold-filled teeth. They

were informed that no such teeth existed, but it was plain to be seen they thought they were being deceived. To these people, we were gold hunters, and nothing could make them believe otherwise.

This skepticism concerning our work and the inquisitiveness of constant visitors to our camp began to get on our nerves. It was for this reason we invented the "Heecome-hicome" story. Andy, whose duty was to go to town after the mail each day, was the first to plant the seeds of our deception. He made it a point to tell those loitering near the post office and in the vicinity of the hotel that he was getting jumpy over things that were happening out at our camp. Those within hearing distance of him quite naturally pricked up their ears to learn what it was all about. In answer to their questions, Andy initiated our subtle "hands off" policy. He confided to his listeners that for some time past we had been unable to sleep, owing to the hair-raising, blood-curdling, ear-piercing screams and wails that had been issuing from the cave during what would otherwise be called the still of the night. According to Andy, this man, ghost, beast, devil, or whatever it might be, was growing more restless, and that even in the late afternoons its muffled screams could be heard far back in the cavern.

While Andy was elaborating on the hair-raising awfulness of existence in the vicinity of Big Mouth Cavern, Joe, who has went to roam the hills and valleys of the Honey Creek region hunting and fishing while the rest of us delved, was telling the same story to the hunters and fishermen he chanced to meet. There was another group of men in the vicinity who worked as long hours and as hard as did our crew, and those were the men at the lime kiln about a mile up the creek from our camp. Jim made it a point to go over to the kiln for the purpose of getting the loan of a wheel-barrow. He took this opportunity of dropping our little yarn into the receptive ears of the kiln employees.

Results were not long delayed. The story spread from hill to hill and from valley to valley. By nightfall it was the topic of discussion at every Honey Creek valley farmer's supper table, at every hunter's campfire, and in the hotel lobby at Grove.

When Sunday afternoon arrived, there also arrived at our cavern home, just as we expected, a large group of town and country people. The human trait of curiosity had gotten the better of them and they were out to see if they could catch a glimpse, or hear a sound, of the Heecome-hicome.

Thoburn was exceedingly friendly to everyone and ere long had them gathered at the cavern mouth, some seated on boulders, others on the cave floor, while the more timid stood awkwardly forming an outer fringe. As was so characteristic of this kindly man, he endeavored to explain the objects that we had dug up.

but few paid attention to his remarks. Instead, they whispered among themselves, wondering when they might see or hear some evidence of the cavern terror.

Arising to the situation that had been so carefully planned, Thoburn switched his lecturing from archaeological objects to a recounting of our experiences with the cavern's mysterious inhabitant. In order to secure the right dramatic effect, he lowered his voice to almost a stage whisper while discussing this fearsome subject.

Just as Thoburn reached the most terrifying part of his narrative, one of the young conspirators leaned forward, motioned to the Professor, and gave a hissing "Sh!" It may sound trite to say that a pin could have been heard to drop, but it was nevertheless true.

Then from far back in the cavern came a barely audible sound, if sound it might be called. The far away sounds, groans, wails, and cries of all the lost souls in Purgatory could never have made a more fear-inspiring discord. With a wild yell, all of us conspirators dashed out of the cavern mouth, screaming at the top of our lungs. "It's the Hecome-hicome! He's coming out!"

Some of us had long considered ourselves sprinters and long-distance runners, but all such illusions were immediately removed, for as we dashed through the sapplings and around the boulders, we were passed by no less than twenty people. First came the young men, flitting by like flying Mercurys, followed in order by old men, girls, small children, and lastly, the older women, who were somewhat handicapped by long skirts. The deed was done. The objective was reached. We subsurface dwellers circled back to the cave and arrived in time to shake hands in congratulations to Joe as he came crawling out of the interior of the cave, covered with clay, but clasping his Osage flute—the great Hecome-hicome.

Our hoax, however, came near resulting in tragedy. A local farmer, who had been among our guests, did not run when the others stampeded, but grabbed one of our loaded rifles that had been carelessly left lying on top of one of the large boulders in the outer chamber of the cavern. Instead of running in panic, this man grabbed the rifle and started crawling back into the narrow passage towards the inner chambers. Fortunately, Jim observed the courageous farmer and hastened to join him in the dark passage. It was here that Jim grabbed the gun from the man's hands and explained to him the whole situation. The quick action of Jim probably saved the life of Joe, who in the darkness would doubtless have been mistaken for the wild beast we had so widely advertised.

Several weeks of unmolesied work followed our bogus beast escapade. Only the most bold ever again visited us. These were weeks in which the Professor theorized; Tate, Andy, and I burrowed into the limestone; Jim pounded the typewriter; and Joe studied the habits of birds in the trees and fishes in the creek.

But elements that were to enter into our lives were soon to draw our expedition to a close. Trouble was brewing from a Mexican revolution, and American troops were being rushed to the border. Jim was receiving telegram after telegram from his newspaper, entreating him to accompany the Oklahoma National Guard to the Rio Grande. Besides being our official correspondent, Jim had also served as cook. We couldn't imagine carrying on our work without him handling the culinary detail. Tate was receiving messages from oil companies saying they could use his knowledge of geology, and were willing to pay for it. One morning, after receiving a letter, Tate came to us, extended his big right hand to each, and told us goodbye. He was headed for the land of anticlines and synclines.

With Tate gone it seemed as though our happy family circle had been broken. The event that destroyed our morale, however, forcing us to break camp and seek civilization, was the vandalizing of our kitchen by dogs, who, unlike their masters, held no fear of the *Hecome-bicome*.

Without food we were helpless. There was nothing to do but pack our archaeological discoveries for shipment, take a farewell plunge in the creek, carefully remove a month's beard from our faces, change clothes, load the wagon that came for our equipment, say a last goodbye to Big Mouth Cavern, and swing up the Honey Creek road towards Grove.

After a seven-mile cross-country wagon ride from Grove, we came to the little railroad station of Bernice. Here we clasped hands and said goodbye, for some were taking a train south, while others of us were heading west.

It was four years later when I sauntered into a barber shop located across the street from the campus of the University of Oklahoma, and leisurely climbed into a chair. In another chair sat Joe, getting his hair cut. No sooner had I seated myself in the chair than I walked Jim. As usual, we started a three-cornered reminiscence, based on our Honey Creek experiences. Before the barbers had finished with us we had formulated plans for a reunion of cave men.

The following afternoon the three of us met on the campus corner, clambered into Joe's car, and sped to Oklahoma City. About five o'clock we arrived at the State Capitol and proceeded to the Oklahoma Historical Society. There we found our old friend

and mentor, Joseph B. Thornburn. Tears of joy filled his eyes when he beheld us. The four of us took dinner together that evening. The conversation was just like old times, but the surroundings were greatly different. The World War had swept Jim, Joe, and me into its great vortex, but had not washed away our recollections of Honey Creek days.

While we talked, Jim drew sketches on the back of an envelope, Joe expressed clever ideas as of yore, and the Professor told stories of early Oklahoma with the same gripping interest as in the days when we gathered around the campfire at Big Mouth Cavern.

The only sadness of an otherwise perfect dinner was the absence of Tate and Andy. Tate was reported by the Professor to be in the interior of peaceful Mexico working as a geologist for a large oil company, while Andy was safely launched on a career of law practice in Waurika.

Yes, it was startling to learn that years ago Joseph B. Thornburn had been laid to rest without even a small marker having been placed at his grave. On the other hand, it is heart-warming to know that he was only forgotten for a while. Under the sponsorship of the Oklahoma Historical Society, sufficient money has been raised in 1956, by generous Oklahomans, to erect an appropriate monument to his memory.